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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2015
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: Grodno Trip A Success, Attracts Attention

Ref: A) Minsk 1327, B) Minsk 1003, C) Minsk 1078

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloffs visited 10+ opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's hometown of Grodno on October 25. Due to the usual government harassment, the independent press has become largely internet based and hopes Western countries will continue with plans to broadcast radio news to Belarus. Opposition activists, though sharing different views, claim to be united behind Milinkevich and the ousting of Lukashenko while the Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP) continues to struggle against the GOB and its new UBP leadership. Poloffs, at the request of the local ideology officer, also spoke with the mayor, who claimed that Grodno has few problems. End Summary.

Independent Press Goes Electronic

¶2. (C) Poloffs arrived in the western city of Grodno on October 25 and, similar to emboffs' visit to Slutsk (ref A), were followed by a police vehicle throughout the visit. Pol Chief first met with representatives of the independent press. Due to the authorities' strong restrictions and interference, most of the independent news has become internet based. Irina Chernyavka of Belgazeta complained that her news site only reaches a few demographic groups, primarily students, because the blue-collar workforce and pensioners usually do not own computers or are unfamiliar with the internet. The government also owns the communications monopoly Beltelecom and the BKGB has a special department that monitors Belarusian cyber space. Following the closure of a Grodno-based internet site and the arrest of a local creator of cartoons mocking Lukashenko (ref B), the local authorities unofficially introduced a new rule that all people must present their passports before using computers at internet cafes and libraries.

¶3. (C) Not long into the meeting, two men entered the room, introduced themselves as regional ideology officers and asked to be present during the meeting. One of the men was using a video camera. Nikolai Markevich, editor of the troubled Den' newspaper, kindly told the men it was a private meeting and that they could wait outside. The ideology officers promptly left and waited in the hallway.

¶4. (C) Markevich and his colleagues noted the importance of radio broadcasts from Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia because they would be able to reach the villages in the border area where residents only receive state-media and

are subjected to non-stop propaganda. According to Chernyavka, most government news is inaccurate because businesses, universities and other institutions are afraid to give the GOB accurate information for fear of attracting unwanted attention. [Comment: Markevich also blamed the delay in independent press development on cooperation between Belarus and Russian secret services and the laziness of American bureaucrats.]

Political Cooperation?

15. (C) Pol Chief met with members of the local Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), United Civic Party (UCP), Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC), and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party Gramada (BSDP). Even though the various representatives rarely meet in such a large group, they claimed to be in contact with each other and united in support for Milinkevich. Yuri Istomin of the UCP admitted that UCP members were upset that Lebedko did not win the single candidate bid, but despite this, his local group is dedicated to supporting Milinkevich. Vladimir Kisilevich, whose BSDP party supports Aleksandr Kozulin, disagreed and considered the Congress of Democratic Forces as only the first step towards choosing a true single candidate. All agreed that elections would not be free or fair and, therefore, they must begin mobilizing citizens for street actions. Sergei Malchik of the BPF predicts that after the 2006 elections, opposition supporters will face massive job loss as they did after the 2001 elections. Therefore, if 10,000 people do not protest in Grodno and 100,000 do not protest in Minsk, the opposition will lose and be forced underground.

16. (C) The activists disseminate information about opposition politics and regional problems via Narodnaya Volya and the Polish-financed newspaper Niva. [Note: On October 31, Grodno police confiscated from Istomin 3,500 copies of Narodnaya Volya. To date they are still in police custody.] They were printing bulletins, but the BKGB confiscated most of their materials. However, they are currently working on another bulletin issue as well as some leaflets, hoping to print at least 20,000. Malchik noted that the Grodno opposition would soon assign each person his/her duties for the information campaign ahead of the elections. Istomin noted that the biggest problem would be reaching rural residents in the villages and on farms.

Poles Still Facing Pressure

16. (C) Pol Chief had lunch with Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP) journalists Andrei Pisalnik and Andrei Pochubot. Pochubot spoke about the GOB's control over the media and noted its interference in foreign news transmissions. On October 24, the Polish-based television channel Pulsar was to air a program on the GOB's treatment of the UBP. However, as the program was about to begin, the channel became scrambled. Pochubot called the local private broadcasting company Garant and was told that the Ministry of Information had ordered Garant to scramble the transmission.

17. (C) The two activists told stories of the GOB's campaign against the UBP. Even though 90 percent of Grodno's Poles still support the ousted leader Angelica Boris (ref C), the authorities would not allow her to assume her position as chair of the UBP. Fearful of any reprisals from Boris sympathizers, the authorities have placed police officers around UBP headquarters, the House of Poles. Schools are teaching less Polish to students and the authorities still refuse to accept any petitions from the UBP. Pisalnik thanked the opposition parties for their support, which showed many non-Polish residents that the authorities were at fault, not the UBP. Pochubot and Pisalnik themselves have been in and out of jail and/or heavily fined for their journalistic and UBP activities. On October 26, a Grodno court rescinded the travel restriction that the police had place on Pochubot.

Special Interests

¶8. (C) Poloffs met Valentin Oskirko of Malady Front and a student self-government NGO, Tatiana Konopkina of the Belarusian School Society, Sergey Antusevich of the AZOT REP trade union, Vladimir Ushkevich of the Grodno Union of Farmers, and Vitovt Rudnik of the Third Sector educational NGO. Rudnik's organization trains journalists, but due to the lack of independent press, Rudnik is focusing more on internet journalism. Antusevich spoke of the AZOT factory ideology officer's cooperation with the BKGB in inspecting the factory's REP office without prior notification or a warrant. Ushkevich, who has not felt much government pressure, continues defending farmers' rights, particularly making sure government-allocated money actually reaches the farmers rather than remaining in the pockets of regional Ministry of Agriculture committee members. Oskirko will soon finish school after taking a one-year hiatus when he was expelled for writing an opposition slogan on a wall. Eventually he was reinstated but he is often threatened with expulsion.

Impromptu Meeting

¶9. (C) Poloffs had not made arrangements to meet with the local authorities, but the ideology officer approached Pol Chief in a parking lot and asked why emboffs did not want to meet with the mayor, who was expecting the diplomats at his office. In an immediate phone call to the Grodno administration building, the mayor seemed surprised that poloffs were in town and did not remember inviting emboffs to speak with him. However, when Poloffs arrived, the mayor had free time to speak.

¶10. (C) The Grodno mayor, Aleksandr Antonenko, and the chair of the regional Council of Deputies praised their good relationships with foreign diplomats, including the Ambassador, and took offense at poloffs unannounced visit. However, he claimed that emboffs should not feel obligated to stop by the administration on every visit. Antonenko noted the small budget as Grodno's primary problem, but everything else was on the right path. Grodno is second only to Minsk in home construction and the oblast's agriculture production provides enough food for the area and for export. The large companies AZOT and a metallurgy plant are state-owned, but a foreign company could buy them easily without any problems. Grodno's education system includes 46 schools and several large universities; the most notable, Yakab Kupala, has 20,000 students and a number of international students from Syria, Palestine, and Afghanistan. The economy has significantly improved with wages rising to USD 250 Q 275 and unemployment is at 1.9 percent. The chair of the regional Council of Deputies boasted that America should be jealous of such figures.

¶11. (C) Grodno has never had a problem with different nationalities or religious groups. Commenting on the UBP situation, the mayor opined that the recent problems with the Poles have been an inter-organizational conflict that became political. He claimed that the Grodno authorities did not want to get involved.

Camera Time

¶12. (C) At the end of the meeting, the chair of the Council of Deputies asked Pol Chief if he would say a few words to the news crew waiting in the lobby. Pol Chief explained that the trip was part of the Embassy's diplomatic work to see the regions and meet with both government and community leaders. The cameraman asked why poloffs had changed their mind about meeting the mayor, to which Pol Chief noted free time in the schedule. After exchanging handshakes with the mayor, poloffs returned to Minsk with the police following for an additional ten minutes past the city limits.

Comment

¶13. (C) The Grodno activists face the same hardships as do activists across Belarus, but they showed great optimism for change. Perhaps it is because a person they know well, Aleksandr Milinkevich, is now the single opposition candidate. The local activists and independent reporters spoke highly of him and were optimistic that he could become a true contender against Lukashenko. The mayor was very cordial and happy to meet with emboffs, but it was surprising that it was possible on short notice. The subtle insinuations in his rehearsed language about the conflict with the UBP and the economy in Grodno indicated that he may see things differently than what he preached to Pol Chief. On a side note, he admitted that he often read the independent and hard-to-find Narodnaya Volya. However, it appears to be a new GOB policy to provide a police "escort" for emboffs and interfere with their meetings.

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